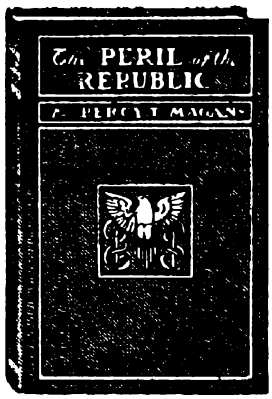

Apocalyptic Anti-Imperialists

The Adventist denunciation of the Spanish-American War (1898) demonstrates that a lively apocalyptic hope can encourage public witness against war and oppression.

by Doug Morgan

"IT HAS BEEN A SPLENDID LITTLE WAR," WROTE John Hay, United States ambassador to England in a letter to the war's best-known hero, Theodore Roosevelt.[1] In Hay's assessment, America's little war with Spain in 1898 was "splendid" for three reasons. First, it was "begun with highest motives." Because of Spain's intransigence against Cuban independence and the repeated atrocities of its colonial rule, the United States could enter the war with the high moral purpose of liberating a grievously oppressed people.

Further, the war was "carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit." Theodore Roosevelt, of course, epitomized that spirit, not only in leading his Rough Riders in the assault on San Juan Hill, but also in the preemptive action he'd taken as assistant secretary of the Navy, prior to the outbreak of the war, in ordering the U.S. Pacific fleet under George Dewey in the Philippines to block possible movement of the Spanish squadron. The action positioned U.S. forces for the most decisive victory of the Spanish-American War, when Dewey crushed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in a battle described by one historian as "a military execution rather than a real contest."[2]

Finally, said Hay, the war was "favored by that fortune which loves the brave." Begun in April of 1898, it was all over by August, with only 281 American combat deaths (though tropical diseases took the lives of around 2,500).[3]

The Spanish-American War and its aftermath marked the emergence of the U.S. as a world power, an empire with worldwide commitments and even outright possessions. This emergence sparked a debate about the nation's character and policies in which Seventh-day Adventists were deeply involved. The Adventist response to the government's action during this epoch adds clarity to the complex picture of the church's interaction with the American Republic in the 19th century. The Adventist response to the Spanish-American War and

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related developments suggests, I contend, that the apocalyptic view of history which Adventists held drove them to bear a witness that involved them in the public affairs of the Republic.

At the outset of the war, Congress had signalled America's apparently honorable intentions by passing a resolution guaranteeing Cuba's self-determination. But during the course of the war, the U.S. acquired numerous island territories, including Guam, Puerto Rico, and most controversial of all, the Philippines. The Philippine independence forces under Emilio Aguinaldo had initially welcomed the Americans as liberators. But the Americans stayed after driving the Spanish out, and ignored the independent government Aguinaldo tried to establish. In February of 1899, the Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris, formally annexing the Philippines. This action led to a two-year war against Aguinaldo's nationalists, in which American troops resorted to various forms of torture, such as the "water cure."[4]

A diverse coalition of voices responded to the U.S. action with alarm, charging the nation with imperialism. Though a minority, the anti-imperialists included many prominent Americans, including ex-Presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland, progressive reformer Jane Addams, labor leader Samuel Gompers, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, writer Mark Twain, philosopher William James, and a host of lesser-known educators and reformers. Though motivated by a variety of concerns—diplomatic, constitutional, political, and economic—the anti-imperialists' major theme was that in becoming an empire and denying those conquered the rights and liberties of Americans, the nation was betraying the ideals on which it was founded and which made it unique, a beacon of democracy to the world.[5]

The anti-imperialists, however, did not prevail. The bold, expansionist spirit of Teddy Roosevelt and what he called "the strenuous life," seemed more vital and progressive to the majority of Americans. For Roosevelt, "righteous war" was a necessary expression of those "virile qualities" which Americans must have if the nation was "to play a great part in the world." He had no patience with "those who make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who cant about 'liberty' and the 'consent of the governed,' in order to excuse themselves for their unwillingness to play the part of men."[6]

According to Roosevelt, President McKinley, because of his initial restraint regarding the dispute with Spain, had "no more backbone than a chocolate eclair."[7] However, public sentiment, inflamed by sensationalized press reports of Spanish atrocities in Cuba and the tragic explosion on the U.S. battleship *Maine* that killed 262 men, finally overcame the President's reluctance and swept the nation into war.

How, then, did Adventists respond to this overwhelmingly popular "splendid little war" and its aftermath? Two levels of moral discourse may be seen in that response. The first had to do with what was right for Christians. The second had to do with the church's witness to the nation.[8]

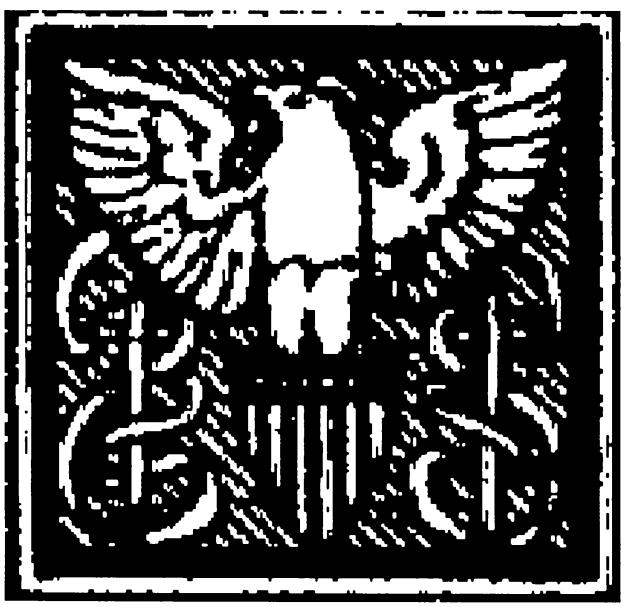
Confronting the Church Militant

The war fervor that had galvanized the nation prompted striking expressions of pacifist sentiment from Adventist leaders. In a sermon preached in the Battle Creek Tabernacle about the same time the United States entered the war, General Conference President George A. Irwin declared, "We have no business whatever to become aroused and stirred by the spirit [of war] that is abroad in the land." He cited several passages from the Sermon on the Mount, declaring that these scriptures "show what I believe is the position of the Christian in this conflict, and what are

the teachings of our Lord and Master in regard to war and the spirit of what comes with war."[9]

A. T. Jones, co-editor of the *Review and Herald*, maintained that "Christian love demands that its possessor shall not make war at all. 'Put up again thy sword into his place,' is the word of the Author of Christianity, the embodiment of Christian love."[10] Ever inclined to state issues in the most stark of terms, the former army sergeant declared that "Christianity is one thing; war is another, and far different thing. Christians are one sort of people; warriors are another and different sort of people."[11]

Such anti-war statements were not expressly for the purpose of advancing a particular national foreign policy, but rather to make clear the moral stance of Christians as a people distinct from the world. In proclaiming these views, Adventists were challenging influential American Christians who pronounced blessings upon the war and American territorial expansion because of its benefits to the cause of Christianizing and civilizing the globe. According to Sydney Ahlstrom, "the churches reflected the American consensus" in favor of the war, "and then proceeded in the limited time available to convert the war into a crusade to rationalize imperialism as a missionary obligation."[12] A *Review and Herald* editorialist lamented the "spirit of militarism" being fostered "right within the bosom of the church," noting the companies of "Christian cadets" training for action under the auspices of America's churches, the prayer services for the "success of the American arms" at a leading Protestant church in New York City, and the irony of "American Catholics . . . praying for the extermination of Spanish Catholics."[13]



President McKinley gave classic expression to the justification of force as a means for advancing the gospel when he explained to a group of Methodist clergymen visiting the White House in 1899 how he had arrived at this decision to annex the Philippines. The president told the ministers that he had been deeply troubled about what to do with the Philippines after Spain had been defeated, and that he had prayed about the problem. Finally, the answer came to him that it would be "cowardly and dishonorable" to give them back to Spain and "bad business" to turn them over to rival nations; moreover, the Filipinos were "unfit for self-government." Thus,

> there was nothing left to do but to take them all [the islands], and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our map-maker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States [pointing to a large map on the wall of his office], and there they are, and there they will stay while I am President![14]

Challenging the widespread acceptance of this linkage between Christian mission and national aggression, Adventist writers pointed to the glaring inconsistencies of associating the cross of Christ with military conquest. Percy T. Magan, then professor of Bible and history at Battle Creek College, pointed to

Jesus' repeated refusal of the temptation to use force to aid his mission, and argued that it would far better serve the cause of Christianity "for a few missionaries to lose their lives at the hands of heathen savages than for heathen savages to lose their lives at the hands of those calling themselves Christians." If the "doctrine of the Bible in one hand and the shotgun in the other is a good one for the Philippine Islands, how long," he wondered, "will it be ere it is considered a good one for every State in the Union?"[15]

After the first year of America's war against the Philippine independence forces, Andrew Carnegie sarcastically congratulated Whitelaw Reid, a prominent expansionist, for his success in advancing the cause of "civilizing" the Filipinos: "About 8,000 of them have been completely civilized and sent to Heaven. I hope you like it."[16] In a similar vein, the *American Sentinel* (predecessor to *Liberty*), then edited by Uriah Smith's son Leon, observed that in fulfilling the "high moral obligation" it had assumed in the Philippines, the United States was "slaughtering the wretched Filipinos by hundreds and by thousands." The *Sentinel* declared that "every Christian in America ought to raise his voice in protest" against this action, which the "sentiment of the Christian church ought never to support (as it now does) . . ."[17]

Thus, the Spanish-American conflict and America's rise to imperial power prompted Adventists, despite prevailing public opinion to the contrary, to declare their conviction that for the Christian church, faithfulness to Christ and his kingdom entailed rejection of war and the militaristic spirit.

Denouncing the American Empire

But Adventists were not content simply to strive for the church's purity by distancing it from the war policy. They had a mission to the world that included bearing a witness to the nation. Week after week, the editorial sections of the *Review* and the *American Sentinel* decried American imperialism as "national apostasy." The *Sentinel* described the shot fired in Manila beginning the war with the Filipinos as a reversal of the shot fired at Lexington in 1775, for it united Americans once again with "imperial government"—this time their own.[18]

Perhaps the most significant piece of Adventist anti-imperialist literature was a book by Percy Magan entitled *The Peril of the Republic*, rushed into print in 1899. Published by the non-Adventist evangelical publisher Fleming H. Revell, the book was a prophetic call to the nation to realize the seriousness of its peril and reform before it was too late.

In contrast to Jones, who was suspicious of American intentions from the outset of the intervention in Cuba, Magan agreed with most Americans that the war to liberate Cuba was indeed a "'war for humanity's sake,'" not a war of conquest, as the United States had allowed the Cubans independence.[19] Jones, however, kept a critical eye on the way in which American promises concerning Cuba were being fulfilled. He picked up on an unguarded statement by a U.S. admiral regarding the U.S. intention to "rule" Cuba, and caustically observed:

> That illustrates how "the people of Cuba are, and of right ought to be, free and independent," as declared by the American Congress, April, 1898.
>
> Hurrah for free Cuba! *Cuba libre* forever![20]

Despite this apparent disagreement, Jones and Magan were essentially agreed in the analysis, and certainly that the annexation of the Philippines constituted "national apostasy." With the takeover of the islands, said Magan, the war begun for "humanity's sake" had "been turned from its high and holy

purpose." By imposing rule on the Philippines without the consent of the governed, America had utterly repudiated the great principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

> Her character as a nation, first formulated in the war of the Revolution, regenerated and reconsecrated in the war of the Rebellion, has been ruthlessly sacrificed to colonial greed and rapacious lust. Awake! O Fathers of the Republic, ere it is too late, and call back your posterity, ere they stray into paths from which there is no returning![21]

Adventists argued that the American rule over the Philippines was based on the same principle invoked to justify slavery.[22] Since slavery, in the words of Lincoln, was an "open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty," why, asked A. T. Jones, "should not this which does the same things in our day be hated by every lover of liberty now?"[23]

It was not simply the conquest of territory to which Adventists objected, it was an entire pattern of militarism which they believed would return America to "old world" despotism, and thus deprive the world of its "last, best hope." Rather than bringing the vitality that Theodore Roosevelt promised, Magan, relying on the work of Carl Schurz, a leading anti-imperialist voice,[24] argued that military build-up and democracy were antithetical.

> Military modes of thinking and methods of action unfit men for the duties incumbent on the citizens of a free republic. The rise of a large, permanent armed force in a republic always portends the downfall and ruin of free government.[25]

With its move toward imperialism and militarism, the United States was returning to the monarchial doctrines of Europe, abandoning the "new order of things" that it had inaugurated. And this "national ruin" portended "the ruin of the world."[26]

In their warnings about the government's course, Adventists were not asking the republic to be specifically Christian. Civil government, ordained by God to use force in the restraint of evil, could not be expected to act in full accordance with Christian principles. But the republic could be expected to adhere to its own expressed ideals, and those of the U.S. were the best reflection of divine ideals to be found in any earthly government.[27] In the controversy at the turn of the century, Adventists, motivated by their particular faith-based concerns, raised their voices in public debate, calling on the republic to square its practice with its principles.

Challenging the Protestant World View

Why were these Adventists, these avowedly apolitical apocalypticists, spending so much time and energy on such political issues? Did they expect or even want the nation to reform, or were they merely on the lookout for signs of the end?

Discussion of such questions must begin with Jonathan Butler's ground-breaking analysis of Adventism's relationship with the American public order in the 19th century.[28] Butler argued that at the time of the denomination's founding in the Civil War era, Seventh-day Adventists engaged in "political apocalyptic"—that is, a rhetorical radicalism that identified America as one of Revelation's beasts because of slavery, but did not issue in action for change, as expectation of an imminent Second Advent was still powerful.

Adventism's public stance then developed into what Butler called "political prophetic" in the latter quarter of the 19th century. This style was characterized by social action on certain issues: human rights, prohibition, and humanitarian ministry in large cities. By such action Adventists began to work for a tempo-

rary delay of the final collapse of society in order that the church's mission might be carried forth. They were working, as Butler phrased it, "to delay the end in order to preach that the end was soon."

Butler did not discuss the Adventist critique of American imperialism, but it appears to fit well into his schema. Though Adventists believed that republican principles ultimately would fail in America, they can be seen here as calling the nation to correct its course for the time being. Yet questions remain about the ongoing function of apocalyptic hope in relation to the Adventist political outlook. It would be misleading to conceive of Adventism as gradually shedding its apocalypticism. Indeed, the very era we are examining saw an increase in intensity of apocalyptic expectation in the Adventist community. Did this reheated apocalypticism simply co-exist in tension with concern for the fate of the republic or, as Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart have recently argued in connection with Adventist denunciations of slavery, were Adventists primarily motivated by a desire to convince people that the end was soon, their political criticism functioning mainly "as a stick with which to beat the American beast,"[29] rather than constituting evidence of genuine public engagement?

The commentary of Seventh-day Adventists on national affairs was not merely fodder for evangelistic sermonizing. Rather, the apocalyptic impulse shaped and energized a particular form of public witness, which reflected a passionate commitment to justice, peace, and human rights.

A matrix of specific apocalyptic interpretations clearly shaped the Adventist perspective on America's rise to empire. The most important biblical passage was, of course, Revelation 13. Since 1851, Adventists had seen in the "two-horned" beast of Revelation 13:11-17 a divine forecast of the career of the American republic. The two lamblike horns of this beast, Adventists argued, represented the principles of Protestantism, or religious liberty, and republicanism, or civil liberty. The beast's dragon voice represented the betrayal of those principles. In the 1850s and 1860s, slavery constituted the betrayal of republicanism, while creedalism and an inclination toward Sunday laws constituted the betrayal of Protestantism.[30]

With the abolition of slavery and the increased prominence of movements for Sunday laws to bulwark a "Christian America," Adventists after the Civil War focused their interpretations of the prophecy about the two-horned beast almost exclusively on Protestant movements to legislate Sunday observance. "For several years," Jones observed in 1899, "we said much, never half enough, about the apostasy of the nation from the fundamental principle of Protestantism. But very little has been said about the apostasy of the nation from its fundamental principle of republicanism."

However, America's imperialist adventure was making the latter "apostasy" dramatically obvious: "*now*, JUST NOW, the *fact* pointed out in that *truth* is being worked out before the eyes of all people."[31] The action in the Philippines, said Magan, constituted an abandonment of the essence of republicanism and a turn to "monarchical ideas" just as religious legislation marked Protestantism's turn to the principles of Roman Catholicism.[32]

For these Adventist interpreters, America's embrace of imperialism at the turn of the century was the culmination of a series of events beginning in the late 1880s that appeared to confirm both the prophecy of Revelation 13 and Ellen White's commentary on that prophecy. Jones repeatedly referred to Mrs. White's 1885 statement that the United States would "repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government."[33] The repudiation of Protestantism had taken place in 1892 with the Supreme

Court's decision in the case of *Church of Holy Trinity vs. United States*, in which America was described as a "Christian nation," followed by congressional legislation making federal funding for the Chicago World's Fair contingent on the fair's being closed on Sundays. For Jones, these actions were *the* formation of the "image to the papal beast" foretold in Revelation 13. Moreover, the 1888 message of righteousness by faith had launched the "loud cry" of Revelation 18 and was making possible the renewal necessary to prepare the church for the final events.[34]

Now, in annexing the Philippines, the United States had forsaken republicanism as utterly as it had Protestantism only a few years earlier. The government had, said Jones, "in principle . . . deliberately and expressly repudiated every principle of its Constitution as a republican government."[35] The import he saw in all of this for the people of God obviously was the necessity of readiness for the "end of all things." Jones frequently ended his articles with the thrice-repeated exhortation: "Get ready, get ready, get ready."[36]

Energizing Public Action

Such thoroughgoing apocalypticism would seem to confirm the view that Adventist interest in public life was limited to end-time prognostications. Indeed, Jones and Magan both insisted that their criticism of government policy was a matter of prophecy, not politics.[37]

But, paradoxically, the apocalyptic vision in some ways functioned to energize public action. The "readiness" to which Jones called his audiences did not mean withdrawal from the world, nor was it only a matter of individual repentance. Rather, it included a summons to action in defense of liberty. Apocalyptic hope charged the brief interim remaining before the Second Advent with such significance that Adventists felt impelled to circulate petitions, appear at congressional hearings, publish magazines, and work the lecture circuit in behalf of their conception of human rights and the public good. Such action, Jones argued, was not "meddling in politics" any more than was the public witness of Daniel in Babylon or the early Christians in the Roman Empire.[38]

> Sacred regard for human rights is a Christian virtue. And for people who stand before the world as Christians, to disregard human rights is doubly wrong, in that (a) it is wrong in itself, and (b) it turns the light into darkness, causing others to stumble on in darkness.[39]

Thus, for Jones, Adventists could no more be silent about imperialism than they could about Sunday laws.

In writing *The Peril of the Republic*, Magan saw himself in a role similar to that of biblical prophets sent to warn kings and nations of the consequences of departure from the divine intention. "Ambassadors of Jesus Christ," he believed, should make their voices heard "in the courts and congresses of human powers, of earthly governments." And he called upon all citizens of the coming kingdom of God to be true to principle "in things national as well as in things personal" and to "work for right principles while it is day."[40]

The Adventist response to a "splendid little war" and America's rise to imperial power around the turn of the century was remarkable for its expression of a pacifist ethic for the church, its forthright critique of the nation's departure from the principles of liberty, and for what it reveals about the function of apocalyptic. A lively hope went together with, indeed encouraged, public witness against war and oppression and for the dignity and rights of human beings.

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5. Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. x-xiii, 216-225.

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9. G. A. Irwin, "The Present Crisis," supplement to *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (May 3, 1898), p. 1.

10. A. T. Jones, "'A Novel Christian Duty,'" *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (hereafter cited as RH) (July 12, 1898), pp. 444, 445.

11. _____, "Christians and War," RH (March 29, 1898), pp. 210, 211.

12. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 879. Adventist writers leveled criticisms at articles in leading Protestant journals such as the *Independent* (see Jones, "'A Novel Christian Duty'"), and the *Outlook,* edited by Lyman Abbott, the influential pastor of Brooklyn's Plymouth Church (see "'The Principles of the Fathers,'" RH [June 27, 1899], p. 412).

13. "The Gospel of War," RH (May 3, 1898), p. 351.

14. Cited in Larrabee, pp. 76, 77.

15. Percy T. Magan, *The Peril of the Republic* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), p. 121.

16. Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass: The Riverside Press, 1931), p. 406.

17. "Not by Politics, But by the Gospel," *American Sentinel* (March 30, 1899), p. 194. Magan noted other ironic outcomes of America's "Christianizing" presence: since the Americans had arrived in Manila 300 new saloons had opened and 21 percent of U.S. soldiers had become afflicted with "loathsome diseases" (*Peril of the Republic,* p. 125).

18. "Lexington, 1775; and Manila, 1899," *American Sentinel* (February 23, 1899), pp. 114, 115.

19. Magan, pp. 38, 39.

20. A. T. Jones, "Solely for Humanity," RH (January 24, 1899), p. 57. Though Cuba did become independent in 1902, the United States imposed on it an agreement guaranteeing the United States many economic rights, the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, and the right of intervention if Cuban sovereignty were threatened.

21. Magan, pp. 103, 117.

22. "Justifying 'Expansion' by the Constitution," *American Sentinel* (January 5, 1899), pp. 2, 3.

23. A. T. Jones, "The Necessity of 'Imperialism,'" RH (December 27, 1898), p. 834.

24. See Beisner, pp. 18-34.

25. Magan, pp. 126, 127; 168, 169. Magan and Jones believed, as did some non-Adventist anti-imperialists, that the United States was recapitulating ancient Rome's development from republic to empire; see Magan, p. 155, Jones, "National Apostasy," RH (May 23, 1899), p. 328, and Larrabee, p. 33.

26. Magan, pp. 114, 115, 165.

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38. "The Third Angel's Message: It Must Be Given," p. 424.

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40 Magan, pp. 158, 193.